

Johnson Building 5-10-22

Thanks to Architecture Table for organizing this event, which has been postponed for two years.

X I am going to be talking this afternoon about an old friend

It is exciting to think that we are celebrating half a century (and a few more years) of the Johnson Building on the eve of a project to renew it

Every building goes through a period of vulnerability

When it is no longer new

When most of the people who made the decisions and committed to the design are no longer around

When changing need patterns lead to an urge to remodel

And when time and wear necessitate replacements and upgrades.

Johnson is of that age.

This building is a product of 1950s and 60s –

A period of strong arch'l concepts that gave the building form

And that also marked a turning point for Middlebury College –

growing, shedding parochial New England image to join ranks of leading liberal arts colleges

It was built under Pres. James Armstrong (led college 1963-75) –

student body and faculty grew by 50% (1300-1900) (104-154)

Dynamic fund-raising by VP Walter Brooker

Addition of three key new academic facilities – serving languages, sciences, arts

Radical masterplan for campus growth

The change evident in its architecture

X Middlebury underwent process of shedding a worn-out Colonial Revival taste, seen in Proctor, Battells, Sunderland for more contemporary architectural design --

Sunderland Language Center,— first of new academic facilities – still in old style

though realized under Pres. Armstrong, completed 1965
 actually planned under Pres. Stratton,
 considered “revolutionary” for language instructional facilities,
 but timid architecturally

X a more progressive taste had actually appeared on campus in Starr Library – 1959-60

Shepley Bulfinch, Richardson, Abbott,
 Distinguished Boston firm, descendants of that of Henry
 Hobson Richardson
 International Style – classical marble and glass –
 curtain wall façade, flat roof

X But other than that single foray into mid-century modernism,
 Midd. managed to dodge the IS bullet that was
 Turning America’s campuses in to homogenized environments
 on model of Gropius’ Harvard Graduate Center and Mies’ IIT
 (Chicago)

X The 2 Buildings fully planned under Armstrong and Brooker –
 Both completed 1968, different style

Science Center – Gropius associated TAC –
 1st of three units planned for front campus

Johnson Bldg for art and music –
 This was a gift of the Johnson Endeavor Foundation in memory of
 Christian A. Johnson, father of recent alumna and art student,
 Julie Johnson Kidd.

For its design the family worked closely with the Shepley firm
 (designers of the Starr addition) to craft a suitable memorial

But these buildings quite different from the elegantly up-to-date Starr

At once rougher and more contextual than the IS

In a new aesthetic of raw unadorned concrete and rough stone
that invoked the colorism and texture of some of the
campus' most venerable buildings --

Why the difference?

By the mid-60s there was an alternative contemporary taste --
A movement called Brutalism, largely conceived as a reaction to
the International Style, and that has subsequently fallen
greatly out of taste

To understand Brutalism, it is important to have a sense of what it was
reacting against --

- X Am. Int'l Style -- largely a creation for corporate America --
Its forte was area of speculative, rental office buildings --
Mies' Seagrams (1954-8) epitomized it at its best--
Repetitive steel and glass façade system
Clear rectilinear mass vs. setback,

Such high style gestures became rapidly formulaic, however,
As the style proliferated as a fashion well-suited to
impersonality and neutrality of a one-size-fits-all, Man in
Grey flannel suit, corporate world

- X As high fashion, aesthetic was also applied to other construction as well
Houses: Philip Johnson, New Canaan, CT, 1949
And Schools -- IIT, Crown Hall , Chicago, 1952-6

Achieved elegant abstract form because everything concealed --
Might be OK for weekend bachelor retreat for Johnson
More difficult if intended for family life

Crown Hall -- Utilities, functions, even structure concealed
in service of form, messy functions contained in basement
below glass pavilion

- X This new taste was slick, at a time postwar Europe could not be so slick --
Not the intact industrial production for steel and glass
Nor the impulse to abstract perfection

in Britain -- Alison & Peter Smithson pursued an in-your-face truthfulness
 Hunstanton School 1951-4 -- (Mies without the refinement,
 lets it all hang out)
 acknowledges brutal realities -- raw joints, stripped down
 restrooms
 Smithsons' "Architecture without rhetoric"

Brits called it "The New Brutalism"

- X Denys Lasdun -- cluster block, Bethnal Green, 1955-60
 Express apts., circulation, utilities
 These buildings expressed specific rather than universal form
- X In France, LC making virtue of necessity -- raw textured concrete
 expressing formwork-- Beton Brut

 Marseilles Block, 1947-52 -- Massive concrete frame, individually
 articulated apartments, conceived as bottles in rack, proportions ruled
 by strict modular system (modular cast into concrete base)

 La Tourette -- 1957-60 -- textured concrete --
 Chapel, common areas, monks' cells

For Europe this was truth in architecture

- X Arrived in U.S. less as truth than as more of a stylistic statement, an
 antidote to International Style uniformity, hyper-refinement

 Early landmark statement of Brutalism in US --
 Paul Rudolph's Arch. School, Yale, 1959-63 --
 Blocky, broken massing, expressing individually & variously
 scaled rooms
 Weighty forms,
 Rough textures of raw concrete (artificially enhanced)

Critics found it refreshing aesthetically -- expressionistic rather than cold,

- X Parallely, Harvard bought into the aesthetic with commission for LC's only
 American building --
 Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, 1959-63

- X 1965 the aesthetic won out in most prestigious competition of its day --
Kallmann McKinnel & Knowles -- Boston City Hall

Inspired by LC at La Tourette

Expression in broken forms of interior volumes –

Public court, principle offices, bureaucrats

- X At same time, the concrete vocab. being used with high formal refinement
And great intellectual discipline

By Louis Kahn, who had trained in Beaux-Arts approach to design –

Method taught interplay between two architectural concerns

Ruling formal conception (parti),

Played off against practical workings (marche) --

Kahn had also experienced firsthand LC projects like Marseilles
under constr.

Strove to combine Brutalist textures w/ sense of conceptually
disciplined organization

Demonstrated in Yale Art Museum 1953 --

Expressed concrete structure – massive columns, broad span 3-D
tetrahedral grid

Combined with formal geometric discipline -- triangles, circles --

Functional needs, and structural/mechanical logic –

Generated concept of servant and served spaces –

utilities fed through clear-span triangulated concrete grid

Kahn refined his approach in later landmark projects –

- X Richards Med. Research Bldg., Penn, 1957-64

Uses Brutalist total articulation of parts

Concrete frame creating clear-span lab spaces

Served by utilities fed from peripheral brick towers

All is revealed—

Structure, utility towers, infilling, mechanics

Critics lauded it as conceptually clear: Architecture about making
architecture

- X Erdman dorms, Bryn Mawr, 1960-65
 - Massing/organizational conception rules
 - Maximize exterior exposure
 - Intimate rooms
 - Grand spaces
 - Unadorned concrete -- light fixtures

By mid 60s Brutalism was in high fashion w/ such prestige projects --
 And combination of Carpenter Center, Yale Museum, and
 Yale Architecture, cemented a particularly strong association of the
 style with cutting edge arts facilities

- L R These the themes that were abroad when Jean Paul Carlhian
 designed Johnson Bldg. 1967

Born into Parisian family of successful decorators
 Studied arch. at Ecole des BA – imbued w/ BA method of parti and
 marche as was Kahn
 would tap his BA heritage in writing monograph on Americans
 trained in Paris, who brought Beaux-Arts to Am's Gilded Age
 (1880s-early 20th century)

Then pursued graduate Study at Harvard –
 Immersed in Bauhaus traditions of Gropius-founded GSD --
 Basis for merging Beaux-Arts ideas with those of
 International Style modernism

1950 joined Shepley, remained his entire career – design partner
 Founder and 1st chair of Design Committee of AIA

Cited in biographies for three notable examples of work

1st -- Bringing height to Harvard –

- X 1961 – 12 story Leverett House – concrete used in formally refined
 fashion
- X 1972 – 19 story Mather House – rawer use of Brick and concrete

2nd – his elegant creation for Smithsonian on Washington Mall

- X Museums of African and Asian Art, 1986 –
highly decorative pavilions in garden,
Main galleries underground w/ handsome geometries repeated
throughout

and 3rd Middlebury
- X Middlebury – on a visit in 2004 he claimed Johnson as one of his favorite
designs
Johnson both a study in truth in architecture
& in formal conceptualism in manner of Kahn
Combined with Carlhian's own refined taste

1st the conception, then the truth –
- X Highly formal, symmetrical plan to serve Art and Music – 2 halves
Each with its own major hall (gallery, rehearsal hall/music library),
offices, teaching Spaces
Shared lobby ,lounge , pit (scene of exhibits, performances)

Main entrance leads to public 3rd floor
Stairs concealed, interior (in-house), give onto academic spaces

different sized and differently shaped spaces
grand multi-ht volumes through core –
triple-ht great hall, double ht. gallery & rehearsal hall accessed
from main public level
- X studio/classroom wings -- double-ht spaces below, single-ht (w/ clerestories)
above, Accessed on floors 2 and 4
- X spaces plugged into varied grid -- expressed frame
- X Massive concrete columns, coffered floor deck

Here the truth becomes evident:
- X Frame scrupulously expressed -- free of walls
Carrying steel roof structure – zone of brown steel and wood

- X Textured to express structural role – e.g. column, slab, railing
 Exemplary of emphasis on disciplined expression of materials & roles
 throughout Building

- X partitions of cement blocks – Laid up vertically w/ straight mortar joints,
 Least structurally stable way to use them -- message:
 non-structural -- concrete frame does the carrying

 narrow courses -- express floor levels

- X All ruled by strict module – coffers, wall blocks
 Expressed (with nod to LC) on front railing

- X expressed utilities -- servant & served – metal-sheathed utility stacks feeding
 ducts above corridors

 Ductwork hung beneath floor slabs
 Covered by hung ceiling panels --
 Free of walls, to reveal true ceiling ht. & utility zone
 Feed into major spaces

 Brutalist truth in architecture – expression of volumes, structure,
 services, materials

- X interior zones and logic carried to the facades

 Front – central public zone
 lobby and lounge at half levels
 Announce atrium zone -- max transparency

 ends -- Classroom/studio wings, clerestories, large volumes

- X floor heights revealed
 heights of spaces -- gf studios double ht.
 lower zone stresses wall, privacy
 upper zone for max light
 restrooms copper sheathed

- X Shallow veneer of stone -- low relief
 - Stone set non-structurally outside of frame
 - Concrete structure expressed --
 - Note column locators
 - Windows in plane of struct.
- Architecture full of lessons about how architecture is made
 - Ruled by the spirit of truth in architecture
 - But also the formality and clarity of Beaux-Arts planning
 - Indeed its remarkable disciplined intellectual clarity throughout
- X It arrived as a statement of modern elegance on Midd. campus
 - Refined use of textures
 - Strict modules
 - Strong colors – mottled warm grey of concrete blocks, warm wood, cherry red carpeting
 - Lobby, great hall
- X Grand spaces -- Gallery, rehearsal hall (w/ organ loft)
- X Elegant furnishings – great hall, lounge, special lighting fixtures,
- X Brought not only facilities, but this building designed as a conscious work of art brought prestige to arts at Middlebury –
 - Art history, studio art, and music expanded and prospered
 - Johnson became a lively center of college culture
 - Endeavor Foundation supporting development of art collection
 - Well-attended weekly programming in pit
- X On the heels of this success, Middlebury commissioned Shepley to draw up plans for a major brutalist-style campus expansion –
 - Housing, academic facilities, Social Dining units
 - SDUs (now Freeman) the only element constructed

Conceived as 9 units in clusters of 3 rising from common terrace bases and served by common kitchens.
 Only one triplet constructed
 Won design award from AIA

- X As for Johnson, over the ensuing years, arts outgrew original program
 Changes began to compromise clarity of expression
 (e.g. panels covering articulations of great hall)
- X Music and art collection moved out, studios expanded,
 Offices and seminar rooms removed to create more studios
 Mechanical demands changed – ventilation issues needed to be addressed
 for studios,
 climate control needed revision
 (e.g. no storm vestibule, complex and energy wasteful AC
 system)
 Designed in an era where energy usage not a big concern
- Lack of handicapped access (freight elevator) – not all levels accessible,
 Not a concern in the 60s, but very much so today
- X And aesthetics proved to be part of a short-lived fashion – no longer valued
 Users found concrete gloomy, raw – block walls painted,
 Losing sense of texture and color modulation
- X And concrete did not age well (stained, deteriorated), red carpeting wore out,
 furniture wore out and was dispersed
- Nationally, Brutalism had become the style America loved to hate –
 Boston's mayor in recent times called city hall the ugliest bldg in Am.
- X At Midd. the SDUs have received an additional floor that alters their
 Character to create Freeman International Center,
 Parts lose individual identity
 The Science Center has been put through a crusher
- X Today Johnson stands as one of only three significant Brutalist buildings left
 intact in the State of Vermont –
 Along with St. Paul's Cathedral, Burlington, UVM Music building

Yet in face of succeeding post-modernism, good brutalism has gritty integrity, intellectual and communicative strength and discipline that leaves it rather heroic

- X If it can survive, Brutalism may someday be recognized among American styles as having something of the expressive massiveness of Richardson and intelligible logic of Chicago Style (styles displaced by historicism & decorativeness of Beaux Arts)

- X The Johnson Building survives almost fully intact to speak of its significant moment in Am. architecture –
 - the beginning of a reaction against IS modernism and one-size fits all
 - Architecture about how architecture is made

And it is poised for significant renovation to give it continuing life,

We are fortunate to have this prime and refined example, full of lessons that make it an ideal home for students thinking about the arts and architecture,

and even more fortunate that with the generosity of its original donor foundation, it is destined for a sensitive renewal.